What to Ask About Grad School

Ask the graduate department

What are the academic regulations/ requirements for graduating?

What percentage of the students pass the qualifying exams the first time? How many chances are there?

Are a large percentage of the students graduating with a terminal masters degree?

What is the average time to obtain a Ph.D.?

How many students will be in my entering class?

When (and how) do you choose your advisor? How difficult is it to switch advisors after, say, a year?

Who selects the dissertation committee?

Is the support offered in the form of a teaching or research assistantship? How much is the stipend?

How many working hours per week is expected for a TA or RA?

Are you guaranteed support for the entire time, or is it on a year by year basis?

If it is year by year, what would disqualify you?

Is there a teaching requirement? How are teaching assignments made (lottery or choice)?

What sort of computing facilities do they have? Do they have easy access to electronic mail?

What are their provisions for housing, day care, health insurance, etc.?

What is the actual time commitment for a TA/RA? Is the stipend enough to live on in that area?

Ask current graduate students

Do the students have enough time for a social life? Is the type of social life you desire available?

What are the environs like? Do you like them?

What is the academic social environment like? For example, do students work together?

How well does the faculty treat graduate students?

Do graduate students have access to athletic and other university facilities?

Is there a graduate student organization?

Are the provisions for housing, health insurance, etc. adequate?

Is the atmosphere highly competitive?

Do most of the students like working with their research advisor?

Before choosing an advisor

What is the average time for a student to finish a Ph.D. with that advisor?

How much monetary support is there for research?

How independent is the research of the students?

How frequently is the advisor available?

Do the students present their work at national conferences? Who pays for attending such conferences?

Does the advisor take an active role in placing her/his students? Do students go into industry or academia?

Does your advisor give you a thesis problem or do you find your own?

Specific issues for women

Is your prospective advisor sensitive to women's issues?

It has been said: "do not go to a place where there are no female faculty."

Talk to female graduate students in the department!!!

Do they have women's support groups? What do they do? Do they have one specific to your field?

Is there a women's center?

Helpful hints

Choose a research area that you are interested in. However, still choose an advisor with whom you get along!

Choose an advisor with broad research interests.

Your advisor should be willing to help you get through in a timely manner, i.e., assist you with meeting the deadlines for preliminary exams, proposal preparation, and dissertation.

Attend research seminars offered at your university and annual meetings of professional organizations.

Participate in drafting grant proposals so you will know how to write successful ones.

Make an effort to present your work at departmental and professional meetings. ■

Adapted from Graduate School in Science and Engineering: Tips For Students and Faculty by Marsha Lakes Matyas